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Leza L Olson 09/18/2006 09:03:15 AM From DB/Inbox: Leza L Olson

Cable

Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L

TEL AVIV 03692

SIPDIS

CXTelA:

ACTION: POL

INFO: AMB AID ADM IPSC PD IMO RES ECON DCM DAO RSO  
CONS

DISSEMINATION: POL

CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: DCM:GCRETZ

DRAFTED: ECON:BMASILKO

CLEARED: ECON: JWITOW, POL: NOLSEN

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6390

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 003692

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2016

TAGS: PREL KWBG SY IS

SUBJECT: MFA'S BARKAN SEES A GROWING CHANCE OF WAR IN THE  
REGION

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b)  
) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: MFA Director of Strategic Affairs Nimrod Barkan told Staffdel Talwar that Iran was not behind the timing of the recent conflict with Hizballah, as Iran had deployed missiles to Lebanon for use on a future "D-Day." He said that the most significant strategic development this year is the signing of a Syrian-Iranian defense pact on June ¶14. Barkan said he is concerned that Syria will attempt to employ "Hizballah-style" tactics in a future war with Israel over the Golan Heights, and expressed concern about a group called the Golan Heights Liberation Front. Barkan outlined three options for Israeli policy-makers dealing with Syria, two of which involve war. Regarding the PA, he claimed that Hamas is not interested in a cease-fire, and added that "no one here believes an economic boycott will topple Hamas." He also claimed that \$55 million has reached Hamas through the Rafah crossing in the last three months. Given these realities, Barkan said the choice for Israel is to work with a weakened Fatah or go to war with Hamas. Commenting on Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's appointment of Yaakov Dayan to act as "Syria coordinator," Barkan supported the decision, saying "what is needed is a realistic look at what the Israeli public can bear in regards to Syria." End summary.

¶2. (C) In an August 24 meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Barkan said that the recent conflict in Lebanon dramatically weakened Hizballah. He claimed that Iran had no interest in the conflict, as Iran had placed Zilzal missiles in southern Lebanon for use as a forward base on a future "D-Day," which he defined as the day when Iran has a nuclear weapon. His assessment of the post-conflict reality for Israel is that conditions on the northern border will improve if Hizballah agrees to stop kidnapping Israeli soldiers and cease attacks under UNSCR 1701. Responding to a question on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's threat to close the Syrian-Lebanese border, Barkan said that closing

the border will not end arms smuggling unless UN forces are deployed along the border. He claimed that the Syrian regime profits from smuggling operations, and will only close the official crossing points, not the informal crossings. Barkan characterized the Israeli victory in Lebanon as "diplomatic, not military."

13. (C) Barkan said the most significant strategic development in the Middle East this year is not the conflict with Hizballah, but the signing of a Syrian-Iranian defense pact on June 14. In the post-Cold War Middle East, Iranian financing for the Syrian military has been, in Barkan's assessment, "essential." Barkan added that shortly after the signing of the pact, Assad publicly stated that an attack on Iran would not be considered an attack on Syria, thus declaring the defense pact to be a "unilateral arrangement."

14. (C) Barkan is concerned that Syria will employ military techniques used by Hizballah in a future conflict with Israel, and that Syria is focusing on procuring anti-tank missiles. He said that anti-tank missiles were successful approximately 13 percent of the time when they were employed in attacks in southern Lebanon. Barkan explained that soldiers, accustomed to firefights in the West Bank or Gaza, were trained to seek shelter in abandoned houses. In Lebanon this tactic was unsuccessful as the enemy's anti-tank weapons were powerful enough to destroy the soldier's cover. Barkan expressed concern about a group calling itself the "Golan Heights Liberation Front." He said that 32 years of quiet along the border had made the Israeli public apathetic about defense of the Syrian border.

15. (C) Barkan's analysis is that Israel has three options for dealing with Syria:

-- give in to Syrian demands for the return of the Golan Heights.

-- launch a preventive war aimed at crippling the Syrian military.

-- prepare for a full-scale defensive war in 4-5 years, once Iran attains nuclear weapons.

16. (C) Barkan said that the Assad regime perceives three main "external threats" from the international community:

-- regime instability, a threat which emanates from U.S. support for democratic revolution in neighboring countries.

-- removal of the Syrian army and influence from Lebanon, which Syria views as part of Syrian territory, not an independent state,

-- Israel's refusal to negotiate over the status of the Golan Heights.

Barkan admitted that Syrian mistrust of Israeli intentions in the Golan Heights is justified in light of the history of failed negotiations. He said that Assad twice mentioned in recent interviews the comment of former Israeli Prime Minister Shamir that Israel would negotiate for ten years, but not do anything to return the Golan. Barkan said the need for a public referendum and 61 members of the Knesset to vote in favor of any return of territory means that the outlook is not promising for Israel returning the Golan Heights in the next two to three years. Unless Syria can be assured of flexibility on at least one of these "external threats," Barkan assessed, they will not leave the Iranian alliance.

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Palestinian Politics  
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17. (C) Barkan admitted that no one in the GOI expected a Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections last winter. He blamed the mistake on

over-reliance on Palestinian pollsters, as well as Israeli mis-reading of the inherent problems in the PA election system itself. He also said that Fatah has failed to heal its internal wounds and that if elections were held today, Hamas would win again. Barkan added that President Abbas is a "nice guy but very weak," and that he cannot revive Fatah. He pointed out that Abbas has been traveling abroad too often in recent weeks. Barkan said that Abbas is working towards a unity government, but by demanding a unity government acceptable to the international community, Abbas is in fact rejecting the prisoners document. Barkan said that Abbas would be strengthened if he were able to negotiate a significant deliverable in a meeting with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

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Gaza  
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¶9. (C) Barkan described the Rafah crossing as "on the verge of a major crisis." He claimed that terrorists and funds in the amount of \$55 million transited through the Rafah crossing in the last three months. He claimed that at least half of the money was from Iran, but that the source of the other \$26 million is unknown. Barkan credited Abbas with maintaining peace along the Philadelphi corridor and preventing militants from tearing down the border wall itself. He also credited Abbas with turning over materials seized from terrorists and preventing Qassams from raining down on Israel from the West Bank.

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Negotiations?  
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¶10. (C) Barkan said Israel's policy until two weeks ago was disengagement from the Palestinians. He said that now, Israel has no policy towards the PA, and "no policy is a policy." Barkan claimed that Hamas is not interested in a cease-fire. Further complicating the situation, Barkan claimed, is the fact that there appears to be no way to legally dismantle the Hamas government. Given these realities, Barkan said, the choice is between working with a weakened Fatah, or going to war with Hamas.

¶11. (U) Staffdel Talwar did not have an opportunity to clear this message.

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